

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER: CHILDHOOD REVISITED

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"If stories weren't told or books weren't written,
man would live like the beasts,
only for the day."
Naftali the Storyteller and His Horse, Sus; p.29¹

-I-

Book I of Love and Exile, A Little Boy in Search of God (1976), refers the reader to Bashevis' other fictional childhood autobiography, In My Father's Court (1955). This reference is obvious not only because both texts deal with the same period of time, but also because the text urges one in an explicit way to read them interrelatedly (cf. p.34)². The first phrase in Chapter One already recalls the information provided by the other narration: "Those who have read my works, particularly my autobiographical volume, In my Father's Court, know....". Thus, some similarities and differences between both texts should be pointed out.

In My Father's Court focuses on the experience of childhood while maintaining its ingenuousness and wonder. Bashevis' statement about the autobiographical character of the narration, directs the reader to leap from the child protagonist to the adult writer and to identify the young with the mature to such an extent that the actual evolution of his personality is disregarded. The later work presents childhood as the primera stage that establishes the basis and leads to further development in Books Two and Three of Love and Exile. The first work could be read as a tale of innocence; the second, as a tale of experience.

¹Bashevis Singer, Isaac; Naftali the Storyteller and His Horse, Sus, U.S.A., 1976.

²All the quotations from Bashevis Singer, Isaac; Love and Exile, Doubleday & Company, New York, 1984, Book One, A Little Boy in Search of God, 1975-76.

no such
word

The profound issues that concern the young thinker in the balcony of his father's house are narrated in a simpler way that intends to be identified with a curious, nonetheless childlike discourse. Here the little philosopher occupies himself with metaphysical questions that are formulated in the more sophisticated manner in which they could be recalled by an experienced narrator. For example, "I wasn't satisfied with mere facts—I wanted to solve the mystery of being." (p.9) and "I was a cheder boy, yet I probed the eternal questions." (p.17)

Both texts seem to pretend ultimately that the reader will trace a direct line without major deviations between the little Itchele or the precocious intellectual "I", and the mature Bashevis. However, while in In My Father's Court, the strategy is implicit as an effect of the reading, in A Little Boy in Search of God the narration of childhood serves clearly to reinforce the identification between Itchele and Singer. This is made explicit by several references: "I was a child but I had the same view of the world that I have today." (p.18), "Those were my feelings then and those are my feelings still" (p.31).

-II-

ca. 1975 In 1976, at the same time as A Little Boy in Search of God appeared in book form, Naftali the Storyteller and his Horse, Sus and Other Stories was published. The former, as another of Bashevis' autobiographical variations; the latter, as a compilation of children's stories. Even though these children's tales lack the declared autobiographical purpose and they are not part of Bashevis' autobiographical corpus, in two of these stories, "A Hanukkah Eve in Warsaw" and "Growing Up", some evident autobiographical material is being rewritten. Moreover, Singer identifies some fictional characters with his real parents and siblings in the introductory note.

Considering the facts that these children's tales were published almost at the same time as A Little Boy in Search of God, that they were certainly written in the same period of Bashevis' literary production, and that their narration is partially superposed, it is specially significant to look at the way in which fictional autobiography is

constructed in this corpus and in comparison with In My Father's Court.

While in the previous book the parental figures and particularly the father, constitute main characters and are extensively portrayed, in the later autobiography of childhood the parents are not dealt with in as much detail. The child's character is being shaped in his early years by an environment and by an atmosphere, rather than by personalities.

✓ Yet, books are by far the most weighted forging power of the child's character. Unlike In My Father's Court, where the figure of Itchele seems to result from his parents influence, their doubts, their strengths, their *disquisitions* and their conflicts, in the later work the child's character seems to result from his own metaphysical search. The character is presented as the primary maker of his own autobiography.

yes
Simultaneously, the conflict between the maternal rationalism and the paternal mysticism that is central in In My Father's Court, is impersonalized and displaced into the readings of the youth. In A Little Boy in Search of God, the child is confronted with the philosophical tension between Kabbalah, Science and Spinozist Pantheism from his omnivorous reading of all kind of books; and the treatment of this conflict takes place, at least during the formative years, in a speculative individual level rather than in the concrete and communal casuistics which are brought to his father's rabbinic court.

✓
A second movement with regard to parental figures is the regression to the previous generation, that of grandparents and forefathers which were mentioned in the other book mostly for the sake of *yichus* and in order to expand the characters of mother and father. In this small 1976 corpus related to childhood, there is a movement back to an earlier generation. In the children's tales, elders are either protagonists (the elders of Chelm; Naftali, whose storytelling ability and performance is completed when he is an old sage) or transmitters of the stories ("The Lantuch" is presented as having been told by Aunt Yentl and "Leml and Tzipa", by the author's mother)³. The protagonism of elders is not

yes point
³Old people are thus added to the long list of unusual storytellers (demons, fools, deviants, women, different social characters) through which Bashevis experimentates and innovates in the art of telling stories.

marked in In My Father's Court, while in A Little Boy in Search of God, there is a constant reference to previous generations of Jews; specially to a corpus of knowledge that goes back many generations, and constitutes a collective production.

Thus, the spectrum of intellectual influence upon the young Singer in A Little Boy in Search of God is broadened in many ways: through the inclusion of other generations by recalling and elaborating their deeds and writings, through the specification and deepening of the powerful legacy, and through the expansion of philosophic rhetorical discourse attributed to the child.

Hence, the elements mentioned above i.e. the displacement of the ideological conflict from the parental characters to the readings, the narration of the self-made personality through the individual intellectual search (intentionally exposed) and the inclusion of older generations into the autobiographical scenery as influential forces (in different authoritative functions: protagonists, storytellers, predecessors, forefathers), point to a certain construction of autobiography. summary

According to my reading, the corpus in both the temporal narration of the autobiographical text and in the atemporal mythical tales for children, could be read as suggesting a type of autobiography, different from Bashevis' biographical childhood narration published in 1955.

-III-

One could say that in A Little Boy in Search of God, Bashevis almost uses up the semantic paradigm of knowledge. It includes not only books, which range from Holy Books, Kabbalah, Wisdom of Solomon, books of morals, to science books by Copernicus, Newton, Laplace, philosophy texts by Kant and Spinoza; also philosophical ideas of Von Hartmann and Schopenhauer, general writers like Romain Rolland, Chesterton, Thomas Mann. There are references to Yiddish, Polish, Russian and Hebrew Literatures and to institutions and forums related to literature: libraries, the Writers Club, literary journals.

This procedure of using the paradigm to such an extreme is distinctively different from In My Father's Court. In the former book,

references are made to two big corpus that enter in conflict: traditonal Judaism with its Holy writings vs. Modern Thought. As I said above, the simplified opposition of ideas overviewed in In My Father's Court is detailed and deepened in the '76 text in order to emphasize the seriousness and complexity of thinking that the child had to go through; and, therefore, the final result, the mature adulthood emerging from the intellectual experience, has to be credited to the individual character's hard struggle.

The text almost succeeds in convincing the reader of the child's assertion that "All the Heavens, the entire eternity were one great Yeshiva" (p.10) The list is so overwhelming that one should consider the function of all this information in the text.

The exposition of his "library" supports the reader's impression that at least in his early years, the future writer was mainly influenced by books rather than by human beings. Personalities that appear later in his youth like the Zeitlins (Chapter 10), are appreciated and their ideology praised by the protagonist. However, their uniqueness and enlightened word are mentioned in reference to the Yiddish writers of their time and not as having been influential upon Bashevis himself. Aaron Zeitlin appears as his pal, his interlocutor, with whom Bashevis shared his anti-leftist and anti-secularist views; but neither Hillel nor Aaron Zeitlin are mentioned as ideological masters or personal examples.

✓ Bashevis' search is primarily individualistic: by himself and within himself.

Despite the search's individualistic character, the corpus in which his identity is probed is mainly the Jewish Tradition, the only realm in which, according to Bashevis, the collective is effective, productive and fruitful. Regarding other communal realms, this text maintains Bashevis' usual political pessimism and his distrust in social solutions; and, although social and historic events have a much larger place in this narration than in In My Father's Court The character is still less influenced by them than by his readings. Nonetheless, the text emphasizes the awareness of the child and hence, of the adult narrator, that he is a recipient of this tremendous communal production.

|| The diachronic Tradition, embodied in books and ideas, seems to be the only communitarian realm to which Bashevis affiliates himself. Thus, I

believe that unlike his first biographical attempt twenty years before, the now older writer constructs a literary lineage. Bashevis ratifies that biography is made by readings rather than by actions, by individual reappropriation of communal legacy rather than by individual praxis in social activities. And the collective heritage within one's self-identity is to be found, even in its religious option, not in any social way or observance but essentially in literary terms.

This solves
a basic
dilemma of
Jewish auto-
biography, so
we will discuss
in class

-IV-

A Little Boy in Search of God is not the narration of a religious search of a pious traditional Jew, but rather the modern search of a youth, whose object is not God itself, but truth. The concept of truth appears obsessively in the text: "...I already started asking myself: 'Is it true?'" (p.4), "'What does all this mean?' I asked myself. 'Wherein lies the truth?'" (p.6), "...and a voice within me shouted, 'I must learn the truth! Once and for all!'" (p.27)

Universal literature did not answer his quest, as the narrator says: "I read the literary idols of the day (...). What I was searching I could not find in their work." (p.41) Another aspect of his demand could be suggested by that phrase: the young future writer was not satisfied by actuality, he was already interested in something ingrained in tradition and therefore resistant to historical and social events which Bashevis deeply distrusts. Following the idea that in this stage of his career, Bashevis is appealing to the collective literary legacy, the material he is seeking, and its literary reelaboration ought to have an aureole of atemporality and permanence. That, he finds only in stories ✓
stories told to him or by him.

As the narrator of the children stories says on p.29 of Naftali the Storyteller and his Horse, Sus and Other Stories, (as well as in the epigraph I chose for this paper), "Those who don't tell stories and don't hear stories live only for that moment, and that isn't enough." Storytelling could hereby be considered as the privileged mode of tradition. By listening to stories, and by telling stories to others, ✓
Bashevis joins the tradition, shares it, and continues its chain.

Literature is the way in which tradition reveals itself to the young Bashevis (whose biography is constructed by his readings) and to other children, to expose them to the eternity of mythical tales.

Truth/Tradition/Tales are transmitted by old wandering sages: by Naftali, by Wolf Bear ("Growing Up"), by Gimpel the Fool; and by old Jewish texts which, for their lack of time and geography are the most mobile and less ephemeral as well. Only such a powerful truth, the tradition of storytelling, can be this potent in different types of fiction, in the construction of an autobiography as well as in children's tales.

Epilogue

Regarding the issue discussed above namely, how Bashevis chooses to fictionalize his autobiography in the period in which he also published in bookform the compilation of children's stories, the corpus suggests that one constructs an autobiography by tracing a literary lineage.

Truth is to be found in fiction: because "the true story of a person's life can never be written (....) would be utterly boring and utterly unbelievable." (Author's Note to Love and Exile), Bashevis proposes that only a fictional lineage made out of books, tales and ideas could produce a writer; and as a writer, he reproduces the same traditional mechanism of storytelling.

Storytelling could also be the answer to the rhetorical question of Itchele that followed Wolf Bear's tales in "Growing Up": How can a beggar from a small village create literature? In opposition to his brother's statement on the beggar's storytelling, "It isn't true", Itchele asserts: "That which Reb Wolf Bear now related at the table *has* to be literature" (pp.141-142). Tales are the only true, believable and amusing biography.

Fictional tales, both the recalled and the new, are also the only answer to the writer's demands for immortality and meaning that he must surely have if he writes his autobiography. For it is in tales that words are frozen in paradigmatical myths while retaining their liveliness as stories

Eternal genealogy is accorded to the one whose biography is made of literature. For the elderly Bashevis, the "old wandering storyteller", storytelling might have been his only anchor when he felt, as stated in the last phrase of Love and Exile, "lost in America".

You touch on all the central issues of IBS's myth-making; your point on his return to grandfather figures is especially insightful.

A

I will need a copy of this too for my files.

Your final grade for the course is A+, a grade I have never given before. But don't let it go to your head!